DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 034 463 FL 001 549

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TITLE Language as a Liberal Art.
PUB DATE 11 May 68
NOTE 18p.; Paper read at the Pennsylvania Modern Language Association Meeting, Allentown, Pennsylvania, May 11, 1968

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$1.00
DESCRIPTORS Audiolingual Methods, Behavior Theories, Educational Objectives, *Educational Philosophy, Grammar Translation Method, Language Experience Approach, *Language Instruction, Learning Motivation, Learning Processes, Learning Theories, *Liberal Arts, Linguistic Theory, *Literature, Literature Appreciation, Reading Tests, *Second Language Learning, Syntax, Transformation Generative Grammar, Vocabulary

ABSTRACT

Language, considered as a liberal art, is examined in the light of other philosophical viewpoints concerning the nature of language in relation to second language instruction in this paper. Critical of an earlier mechanistic audio-lingual learning theory, translation approaches to language learning, vocabulary list-oriented courses, graduate "reading exams", and other artificial language experiences, the author lauds the contributions of transformational-generative grammar theory, particularly the work of Noam Chomsky, for freeing language from the narrow confines of behavioral approaches to language instruction. A strong defense of literature is made, proposing that literature is the noblest form of language and, as such, is the proper study of language students. The use of literature to encourage language study is urged. (RL)

ED034463

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(Allentown, May 11, 1968)

Language as a Liberal Art

I am sure that all of us here are ready to spring to the defense of the cause of foreign language study whenever the occasion arises. But I do believe that our profession has used in the past and to a considerable extent still uses today certain feeble or even downright erroneous argumentative support of the study of foreign languages. For many centuries, foreign language training was considered to be an analytical, intellectual process, and beneficial for this reason, a belief that has only in recent years been exposed as false by the structural linguists. There are, I fear, a lot of foreign language teachers who haven't yet got the message - not to speak of English teachers, who in the aggregate know even less than foreign language teachers do about the new and in my opinion far more valid analysis of language that we owe to the structural linguists, and the consequences of their findings for the teaching of language. The fallacy underlying the centuries-old practices of foreign language and English teachers is a confusion between the philological or linguistic study of a language which is indeed an analytical, intellectual pursuit, and the learning of a language for use. We know now - thanks to the science of linguistics - that the acquisition of a language for use, whether it be our native language or a second, third or fourth, is not significantly related to any analytical intellectual process, that language lies and must lie elsewhere in the psyche. I had a language teacher in high school who used to try to get us to speak German, but at our first mistake or even our first hesitation, she would always hold up her finger and say "Think!" She didn't know a thing about the nature of language.

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I am reminded of the modern fable - is it one of Thurber's? - about the psychologically sophisticated caterpillar who hated a certain centipede, and approached him one day full of hollow praise for his marvellous ability to propel himself by moving all his legs at just the right instant. "How do you do it?" he asked slyly. "Well," answered the flattered centipede, "first I move this leg forward and then this one and then- " and he was never able to walk again. My high school language teacher would have got a lot further with us if she had held up her finger and said "Don't think!", or at least had recognized that the production of nouns, verbs, adjectives in sentences in the right order and in the right form comes from a quite different part of the brain from the thought processes involving the content of what one tries to say. Just think of my problems at this moment if I had to think of the forms, tenses, singulars, plurals, agreements, juxtapositions of the words I am using to convey my meaning. And how much of what I am trying to say would you understand if you had to do the same thing in reverse? What is happening on the verbal - the language - level, is communication, and it does not involve analysis and intellectual discrimination. Audio-lingual techniques in widespread use today are predicated on the assumption that language acquired for use must be as an automatic process, as a set of speech habits, as conditioned response to a stimulus, as communication.

Then there is the wearisome argument which talks about all the Spanish-speaking secretaries corporations need, and all the marvellous opportunities in consular services around the world. These facts, though they are facts of course, are no reason at all to inflict language study almost universally in school and college. What a tiny percentage of those who study for-

eign languages ever get that far, and, incidentally, what a tiny percentage of those Spanish-speaking secretaries learned their Spanish in school and college.

Now I personally put the argument for scientific German in a similar category, though here I am certain to get opposition from other German teachers. I see little justification for the many second year German courses given in leberal arts high schools and colleges that are labelled scientific German. For one thing, there isn't anything much about the structure of scientific German that's different from the structure of German. It would be a mystery if there were, for the scientists are trying to communicate, just as everyone else does, and if you want to communicate <u>any</u>thing in <u>any</u> language you'd better stick to the structure of that language. For another, in my experience a course in scientific German is always a terminal course - it doesn't lead anywhere, and, at the level it is usually offered, the intermediate level, it substitutes for another course which might very well lead a certain percentage of its students further. For another, it is a service course. Here the department is doing, not something it wants to do - and can do well - how many of us are <u>properly</u> trained for it? - but something other departments want us to do or at least will tolerate having us do. Above all, scientific German courses are, I think, relics of the discredited belief that language is chiefly vocabulary, and that what is needed is to pour large lists of specialized words into the student in order to guide him to mastery of the language. We know now that this is not so, that vocabulary is not the major stumbling block to acquisition of a foreign language, that syntax is far and away a more formidable obstacle, that large-scale acquisition of vocabulary can and should be postponed until the syntax has been

mastered and assimilated, (and there is still plenty of this to do on the more complex level of expository prose in the second year). At the proper time, vocabulary will be absorbed in a far more natural manner, - and retained furthermore long after the final examination, something which cannot be said for vocabulary learned under forced draft before the basic syntax has been mastered.

It is of course true that the layman thinks of a foreign language as his own language using different words, but this is no reason for us as professionals to foster the notion. The graduate student of economics, history, social studies or other subjects still thinks there are only three essential requisites for passing his graduate foreign language exam, the "reading exam" as it is snobbishly but erroneously called. In reality it is in most cases a translation, a decoding, a deciphering exam, and indicates very litte about the student's ability to read the language. These tnree supposed essential requisites for passing the Ph.D. translation exam are: enough time (the usual required rate of speed is about 300 words an hour!); free use of a dictionary; and a good command of substandard English. But professional language teachers know better, and those foreign language departments who are expected to administer such graduate exams for other departments - well do I remember having to do this in my salad days - are fostering erroneous beliefs about language and acquiescing in shoddy standards.

Still another justification for the study of foreign languages which I will not call weak because it is indeed legitimate and valuable, but which is more often than not misunderstood even by language teachers is one defined by Wm. Riley Parker in the section "Values of Foreign Language Study" of his most excellent UNESCO publication, The National Interest and Foreign Languages. The study of foreign language, Parker writes, leads to "a new understanding of language, progressively revealing to the pupil the structure

of language and giving him a new perspective on English." Now this is indeed an outcome of a properly taught foreign language. But how many times have we heard foreign language teachers say -- and how often have we read it in the prefaces of traditional grammars - that the modern student doesn't know any English and that the foreign language teacher must first teach him English grammar before he can teach the grammatical facts of life of the foreign language. If high school students don't know English grammar, it isn't because high school English teachers haven't been trying to pour it into them for years. But on the whole they have been going about it in the wrong way. My daughter, who got an 800 on her College Board Achievement test in English but only got B's in English in high school, asked me the other day what a nominative absolute was. I told her I didn't know what it was and in any case I didn't think it was very important to know. Her reply was, as you can anticipate, "Well, it's important in English class!" Incidentally, if you think I should be embarrassed to admit I don't know what a nominative absolute is in English, I asked at least twenty colleagues, and none of them knew either, though it was clear from the way they answered that they all did once know. It used to be important - in their English classes.

But this futile predilection for grammatical nomenclature and unnatural Latin-oriented dissection of language is certainly not what Parker's statement refers to, and any foreign language teacher who is going to attempt to do this in English first (after English teachers have knocked themselves out trying) and then do the same in the foreign language is beaten before he starts, if he really wants to teach the language. Parker's statement refers to an important outcome of language study, and means that in a properly taught foreign language class the student will gradually become aware of language

as a phenomenon he has lived with all his life but has never really noticed; that he will see the essential nature of all languages, of language as a universal human phenomenon, and thus attain a new insight into his own.

Now there can be and certainly are differences of opinion about many aspects of foreign language teaching. But the language teacher has a solemn professional obligation to be informed about recent discoveries - call them theories, if you don't like the word discoveries - about the nature and structure of language which have resulted from the intensive study carried on in the last 30 years or so by structural linguists, and the implications of these for the teaching of language. Otherwise he is an amateur. All doctors know about penicillin; lawyers know about recent civil rights legislation; basketball players keep up with the latest rules changes; shouldn't language teachers be informed of the latest findings about language? I do not mean being casually informed, but substantially so. Lots of foreign language teachers, teachers of English even more so, curiously seem to feel no strong obligation to be informed about such matters - many do not even know of their existence, which is an indictment of our teacher training programs too - the NDEA Institutes repeatedly give us massive evidence of this. But the insights are there, and they won't go away just because we look in another direction.

The recent theories of the Chomsky school of transformational grammar, for instance, may in the not too distant future play a significant role in theories of language teaching. They seem to be growing in importance and acceptance, and are, I believe, already beginning to modify certain aspects of our audio-lingual techniques. All of us as professional language teachers need to know what's going on here and how it may cause modifications in what we are doing. Chomsky claims that the most obvious characteristic

of language behavior is that it is not imitative and dependent on the acquisition of a fixed stock of over-learned basic patterns as we have been preaching for some years now, but is stimulus-free and innovative. Every person, at least in his native language, is perfectly capable of combining words, on an internal impulse, in ways that they have never been combined before, and in fact does so every day of his life. Chomsky argues that no amount of massive repetition, imitation and variation drill would equip a student with the ability to speak a foreign language independently; that we audio-lingual teachers would not have the modest success in teaching a foreign language we do enjoy if there were not a priceless ingredient - unrecognized and unacknowledged by us - working for us. He calls this by various names, most recently by the term "deep structure." If I understand the latest phase of this still developing theory correctly, "deep structure" is a stock of pristine skeletal meanings inherent in the human brains, from which all possible utterances can be derived by an instantaneous process of transformation, and which could not be the source of a single one of the infinite number of possible nonsense combinations. If he is right, and if the nature of this "deep structure" can be determined - what will happen to language teaching? Actually, I think, not all that much. Our present audio-lingual techniques will need to be adjusted to incorporate these new insights, the result being a still more efficient and hence more successful method of teaching foreign languages. But this is highly speculative and debatable. My point today is that we had better know what's going on. By what right can we call ourselves professional language teachers if we don't?

I think too that there is an urgent current reason for all of us to be prepared to argue the case for foreign languages before the general public and be sure we can hold our own against intelligent people who fail to recognize

the unique value of foreign language study. For as long as any of us in this room can remember, we have enjoyed a certain immunity to effective criticism in the form of a language requirement. Already, as the study of languages becomes a more substantial part of the school and college curriculum, as it has in recent years, the justification for a separate language requirement is coming increasingly under fire, and we language teachers will need to think more sharply and speak more precisely about our discipline. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not in favor of abandoning the language requirement - at least not for a while yet - but I am now and always have been and always will be in favor of having language teachers act - and teach - as though there were none, as though the continuance or discontinuance of language study by their pupils depended solely on what goes on in the language classroom. Paradoxically, this, I think, is the best argument we could give in favor of a language requirement.

And here now finally I get to the title subject of my talk, Language as a Liberal Art. The Copernican step; the cultural expansion: the liberating experience which learning to communicate in a different medium represents - a medium which is not exotic, artificial or mechanical, but is used as the normal means of communication by many millions of people - this is what I would like to see emphasized as the chief value of foreign language study by our profession. A department which will do this will free itself from the onus or the down-grading implied by the term "service department" which is applicable to too many foreign language departments today. The foreign language department which emphasizes the cultural experience even above the acquisition of skills becomes a first-class citizen with an independent justification for existence, not one which has to live on the indul-

gence of other departments and their needs.

And indeed the cultural aim - the Liberal Arts factor - can be a liberating experience to the language teacher himself. It will set him straight, show him what must go on in his classroom and what must not go on. It will, quite apart from any theory of methods, get rid of conjugation and declension and vocabulary lists and word-for-word translation and student composition full of mistakes and Americanisms turned wholesale into the foreign language and it will bring exactly that kind of activity into the classroom which will fascinate the student, which will give him a genuine cultural experience, and which will permit him to acquire the skills - all four of them - in a more efficient way.

At Harvard - if you will forgive me the personal examples, but I want you to know I practice what I preach - German is taught by all, including a large group of Teaching Fellows whom we train, as an authentic language experience from the first day - the first moment - on. We believe and believe with great conviction, that the student who has attended only for one hour must have had an experience in real language communication, must have heard natural German spoken with normal intonation at normal speed with at least near native pronunciation and must have been encouraged to respond in kind, not once but perhaps 100 times, in the course of that first hour.

The German he hears must be real German, not the "la plume de ma tante" variety, not the artificial constructs we have had to live with for so long. I quote from the first reading selection, in translation, and with the nationality of the names disguised, from one of the most popular traditional grammars in use for a certain language, not French, German or Spanish:

The Smith Family

"The Smith family is American. Charles is the father. Anna is the mother.

Charles is the husband. Anna is the wife. Charles and Anna are husband and wife. Henry Smith is the son of Charles and Anna. Mary is the daughter. Henry is Mary's brother. Mary is Henry's sister. Henry and Mary [wouldn't you know?] are brother and sister. Charles and Henry are father and son. Anna and Mary [you guessed it] are mother and daughter.

[This next sentence is my favorite]. Now enough about the father, the mother, the son, the daughter, the borther and the sister." And that is the end of the first reading selection. This is not communication. It isn't natural language. It is wholly artificial. It is, in fact, little more than a disguised vocabulary list. What a way to introduce students to a new language! As for its intrinsic interest and the intelligence level - how can such traditionalists bring the charge of illiteracy against modern style techniques and materials? The things the student hears done with the language, that he himself does with it must be genuine communication, not just communication to the teacher that he has done his lesson, not filling in truncated endings, translating insipid variations of the artificialities of the reading selection, certainly not conjugating and declining, but using the language as a living means of communication.

Here is where, I suppose, the FLES teachers have the advantage over the rest of us. I ~~know little or nothing about FLES~~ am not a FLES expert, but how else can you teach a foreign language to subteen pupils than as an authentic language experience? This, on a more sophisticated level, is what we must strive for in high school and college. And anyone who feels that such procedures are an insult to the intelligence of more mature minds should compare the student evaluations of German courses at Harvard in the Confidential Guide for the last five years or so with what they said ten years and more ago.

Now what I have said about the first day in the foreign language

classroom involves a principle against which we should measure everything we do in our classes from then on. The acquisition of the foreign language is thus a continuum for as many years as the student wishes to be exposed to it. When the listening and speaking skills have reached a certain level, when the understanding of the nature of language and the control of the basic structure has progressed sufficiently, the reading skill is gradually given increasing importance. Note that I said reading skill, not translating. In our department there is an outright prohibition in all elementary, intermediate and early advanced language classes against the translation from an open book of any single sentence, German to English or English to German. And why not, if authentic language experience is the aim? What language does the German translate into when he reads German? What language do we translate into when we read English? The only possible justification for the use of translation as a device to teach reading would be if it were the most efficient means to that end. Or perhaps alternately of more interest to the students. But it is neither, is in my opinion only an admission on the part of the language teacher that he doesn't know what else to do. And this is a pretty serious admission in view of what has happened in language circles in the past 15 years or more.

Incidentally, we do not have "inside" and "outside" reading in our classes, that poor excuse for language instruction that is in such widespread use, where "inside" reading really means close translation of a few pages during the class hour, and "outside" reading means assigning a big chunk of material and leaving the poor student to struggle through it any way he can - which is usually by frantically trying to translate it too - all thirty pages of it - because that's all he's been taught to do.

We teach reading, not translating, and speed, assurance, sensitivity to syntactical complications, acquisition of new vocabulary, all take place naturally, and somewhere along this path the student begins to become aware of literary style. This discovery is greatly fostered by the classroom activity, which is largely question and answer, paraphrases and simple discussion, in the foreign language usually, though with Frank Ryder, "when humanistic content threatens to expire in convulsions of syntactical or lexical starvation, I turn to English." The quotation is from a sound article, "Literature in high school - a college point of view," in the September 1965 issue of The German Quarterly. Prof. Ryder goes on to say, and I fully concur, "I view with skepticism the casual claim 'Oh, we do all our discussion of literature in German.' Who did what, when, where and to whom is not the whole of criticism and one suspects that this is often what lies behind the claim."

The student's ability to express himself in the foreign language is limited, of course. But the juxtaposition of the German he knows and hears with the German he reads gives him an excellent opportunity to develop a sensitivity both to literary style and to linguistic creativity. And this is the point for Advanced Placement to begin in high school. Now there is opposition to Advanced Placement among some advocates of modern language teaching techniques. The opposition groups itself around two basic issues, as I see it. Some doctrinaire modernists frown on the study of literature in high school and particularly on Advanced Placement as an unwarranted interference in the process of complete language training. These people, I think, have a dream, or an ideal that the total process of acquisition of a foreign language can in time be structured in the same way as the earlier stages have been

structured so magnificently in recent years. Doctored texts have been prepared on more advanced levels to "protect" the student from unfamiliar syntax and to introduce vocabulary even on an advanced level by structured repetition of new words and phrases so many times within so many pages. This, to be sure, is done with infinite patience practice and expertise and is a far cry from the old-style graded readers. No advocate of modern techniques would permit the degree of unnaturalness and artificiality of language, the over-use of loan words, which are a prominent characteristic of the old-style graded readers. The doctoring of the texts I am speaking of is done with high regard for a normal and fully idiomatic use of the language.

But I think their dream is a will-of-the-wisp, and their attempts to develop such techniques misguided. The central core of a language when properly understood is marvellously compact and when the teacher begins his instruction at the nerve center of the language and expands outward with caution, seeing to it that the entire area of his gradually expanding concentric circles is controlled by his students, he has built the language experience on a solid rock (if you will permit me to mix metaphors for a moment). But anyone who knows about geometric progression or the substantial increase in area a slight rise in the diameter of a circle produces must realize that once the circle (the language area over which hopefully the student has total control) reaches beyond a certain point, the teacher has got to accept the inevitable and give up his attempts at comprehensive control. He had better do at this point what wise parents of teenagers know they must do, however reluctantly; loosen the reins and grant increasing amounts of freedom which will ultimately result in total freedom from parental control, - adulthood - or effortless control of the language, to get back to the subject at hand.

The second basic opposition to literature courses in general and Advanced Placement in particular argues against the historic hegemony of literature and wants to see it replaced by a more comprehensive treatment of all, or at least, some other aspects of the culture. Advocates of this want to see not only the other arts treated, but customs, history, economics, politics, geography and so forth, often instead of literature. A recent article in the Modern Language Journal called for college courses in French mathematics! There is no such thing as French mathematics!

Such an anti-literary orientation is, I believe, based, in part at least, on a confusion of issues. As far as elementary and intermediate language classes are concerned, there have appeared in recent years a wide variety of non-literary readers. Publishing activity in this area has never been more lively than it is at this moment. In German I could mention at random such titles as Im Wandel der Jahre; Das Deutschland unserer Tage; Zweihundert Jahre deutscher Kultur; Deutsche Jugend von heute, and so forth. So that the teacher does in fact have an increasingly wide variety of such texts to choose from. And as language teachers, though we may have had little or no training in such subject matter, we need have no inhibitions abbut using such materials in first and second year classes where the central focus is on the acquisition of the language. My own experience, both in high school and college, has been that exactly here well chosen literary texts, with their subtler style, their characterizations, plot, suspense, humor, are usually more attractive to students than the other kinds, which in general assume a great deal more active interest in the foreign culture than is often present. But I can easily understand that other teachers may have had differing experiences.

But what about the advanced courses, where substance becomes increasingly more important? My own training, and that of all my colleagues, is in language and literature. In advanced classes I insist on teaching what I have been trained to teach. Most students who major in a foreign language in college have language and literature in mind anyway, not language and economics, language and mathematics or some other combination. And college and university departments of language and literature are not soon going to hire non-literary specialists for major appointments. Occasionally one hears of a Frenchman or a German or a Spaniard from another department like history who is willing to give a course in his native language. This is all to the good, but is an isolated luxury. I can't exactly envision that departments of history, economics, natural science, etc. will be easily persuaded each to engage one German, one Frenchman, one Spaniard, one Italian, one Russian, etc. to give courses in their subject to foreign language majors.

Above all we should not overlook the more intimate and subtle connection between language and literature than between language and the other areas. Literature <u>is</u> language in its noblest form, and is a more logical continuation of language study than any other single segment of the foreign culture. As for the Advanced Placement courses in high school, which are exclusively language and literature, they are intended for the more gifted, more highly motivated, college-bound students. It follows that the non-gifted, less highly motivated or non-college-bound should have some other kind of program if it proves more appealing to them, but the former - the language profession's best hope - should certainly not be deprived for the benefit of the latter. Though I am a thorough convert to audio-lingual techniques, I do not hesitate to confess that I still have a sense of satisfaction when

the inanities and relative brainlessness of the early audio-lingual stages can gradually give way to more mature considerations. (Here I take the liberty of quoting a paragraph from an article of mine in the Advanced Placement issue of the German Quarterly, September 1965), "And I should think that Advanced Placement would be the salvation of many a dedicated high school audio-lingual teacher and his best pupils. To see that the thorough assimilation and automatic use of the typical intellectually neutral everyday situations, syntax, vocabulary, and language habits in general, not only can but does lead on to a proper consideration of literary matters - that the two are clearly different facets of the same fundamental phenomenon of language - is for many to be richly rewarded for strenuous effort in the early stages of language learning. That the high school teacher should miss out on this, that the most gifted and brightest language students should have to wait until they go to college to experience it, is an unwarranted impoverishment of secondary education. And I am sure it represents a loss of potential majors and ultimately new recruits to our profession."

I submit that all I have said falls under the heading of language as a Liberal Art. I have saved until last what is perhaps most controversial: at least among college teachers. Since I believe above all in the Liberal Arts aspect of language study, since I want my department to be looked on as a vigorous and energetic proponent of foreign language study, I am absolutely opposed to having my department offer courses in German literature - or German anything! - in English translation. To the argument that we should not allow students to be culturally deprived just because they haven't learned German, I am impervious. My answer is, let them study the literature of

whatever language they have learned! And if they nevertheless have an insatiable urge to study German literature in transaltion, let them do it elsewhere. I cannot help but feel, though I may be unfair in this, that courses in translation given by language departments are a part of the numbers game. All those nice non-German students added to our enrollment.

As for the claim that such courses bring added prestige, I caution that this is acquired at a serious cost. Such a language department will be in an equivocal position the next time the language requirement is up for discussion. Do we or do we not believe in certain unique values in the study of a foreign language? And are these or are they not bound up with a true understanding of German literature? As to prestige, please let me close with a brief description of the most talked-about course in my own German Department. For about ten years we have had a course, German 75, "General View of German Literature," made into the most successful foreign language course at Harvard by Professor Bernhard Blume, now retired. Part of the reason for the phenomenal success of this course was the strong liberal arts, non-specialized orientation Professor Blume gave to it. In recent years, it has been attracting about 40 non-language majors from many different departments. Beginning this year, the German Department has been invited by our recently reorganized General Education program to offer this course, slightly modified, as Humanities 75. It is now called "Literature and Related Arts in German Culture," it continues to consist of lectures and readings exclusively in German, and weekly discussions in small groups, in German or English, depending on the students' abilities; and it satisfies, not the language, but the General Education requirement in the Humanities. The current enrollment is over 80, by far the largest enrollment in any German course we have ever given. We are proud to have our German Department functioning - in German - within the central core

of Harvard's General Education Program. In fact, I am glad that all the courses in our department are associated with those values in education that are commonly known as the Liberal Arts.

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